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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 007979

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/05/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [KMPI](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: NATIONAL AGENDA COMMISSION COMPLETES ITS WORK, BUT
LEAVES KEY ELECTORAL ISSUE UNRESOLVED

REF: A. AMMAN 7498

[1](#)B. AMMAN 6898

Classified By: CDA David Hale for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The royal commission charged with drafting a comprehensive National Agenda has completed its reform recommendations. Consensus was reached on all major issues except for electoral reform, with East Banker traditionalists determined to gut the proposed "national list" system. The GOJ plans to present the King with a copy of the Agenda for his final approval in mid-October. Key members of parliament are already gearing up for a fight over the Agenda, while the government struggles to develop a strategy to sell its benefits to a skeptical public. End Summary.

ROYAL COMMISSION COMES TO AN END

[1](#)2. (C) Post contacts have confirmed that the royal commission charged with drafting the National Agenda has concluded its final group meeting. The 26 members of the commission were able to reach consensus on a broad range of recommendations for reform, with the important exception of a new electoral law -- the core of any move toward democratization, and a reform that would potentially transform the Jordanian parliament. From the start of the Agenda process, East Bank traditionalists opposed major changes to the existing system of electoral districts that over-represent rural and tribal areas at the expense of the urbanized Palestinian-Jordanian majority. Senator Osama Malkawi, a conservative East Banker and a member of the commission's sub-group tasked with political reform, told poloff October 4 that he saw "no reason and no demand by the people" to change the current system. Nevertheless, under strong pressure from other members of the sub-group, he eventually agreed to a proposal that would divide seats in parliament among deputies elected from geographic electoral districts, and those chosen from "national lists" of candidates submitted by political parties or independent groups and presented to all Jordanian voters. The proposal would further scrap existing parliamentary quotas for women, Christians and Circassians, and instead oblige all national lists to include candidates from each of these groups.

[1](#)3. (C) Fearing that national lists of candidates could weaken their hold on parliament, East Bank traditionalists quickly acted to gut the proposal when it moved from the sub-group to the full commission for debate. According to Ashraf Zeitoun, personal assistant to Deputy PM Marwan Muasher (who leads the commission), Senator Rajai Muasher - Marwan's cousin - vocally rallied other traditionalists on the commission to demand that citizens be given only one vote to cast in the mixed system, knowing full well that tribal allegiances, family pressure and low public regard for most political parties would ensure that a large majority of Jordanians would opt to vote for a candidate from their geographic district. NOTE: In an October 5 discussion with poloff, Senator Muasher argued that a one vote limit would "benefit" political parties by forcing them to develop platforms responsive to public needs in order to attract votes for the national lists. He similarly argued that a one vote limit would make voters "seriously consider the role and platforms of parties" in deciding whether to vote for candidates on a national list or a candidate from their district, rather than "throw away their vote for a party without thinking" under a two-vote system. END NOTE.

[1](#)4. (C) Modernizers in the commission were equally adamant that citizens be given two votes to cast. Commission member and women's activist Nuha Ma'aytah told poloff October 4 that giving Jordanians only one vote in the mixed system was "unacceptable" as it would render the national lists "meaningless." She feared - and Senator Malkawi confirmed - that if a single vote system were adopted, traditionalists would use the lack of votes for national list candidates in the next parliamentary elections to argue for abolishing the lists. The commission member from the Islamic Action Front (IAF), Abdul al-Latif Arabiyat, likewise was unyielding in advocating for giving citizens two votes as he recognized

that the IAF - as the most visible and respected political party - had the most to gain from the election of MPs from national lists (ref A).

15. (C) Zeitoon described the interchange between commission members over the electoral issue as "very heated," with frequent bouts of yelling and several instances of members leaving their seats and walking out of meetings in protest. Although Deputy PM Muasher was "determined" for the commission to reach consensus, he eventually realized that no compromise was possible and reluctantly agreed to finalize a draft that contains two proposals on electoral reform -- one recommending one vote per person in a mixed electoral district/national list system, the other recommending two votes per person. All four senators on the commission, in addition to all four of the MPs from the lower house of parliament, reportedly lined up behind the one-vote proposal.

NEXT STEPS AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

16. (C) Deputy PM Muasher told Charge on October 3 that the National Agenda is now in the final drafting stage, with the recommendations being edited for submission to the printer. No more meetings of the commission as a whole will be held, though Muasher may consult with members on an individual basis. Muasher plans to provide King Abdullah with a copy of the recommendations by mid-October for his review and approval, after which it will be rolled out to the public. According to Zeitoon, the National Agenda will be comprised of two separate documents or "packages." The first will be roughly 180 pages in length and will include an executive summary and reader-friendly charts and graphs to help explain the Agenda's varied recommendations, which cover eight subject areas. The second will contain benchmarks and indicators that ministries will use in formulating action plans to monitor implementation of the Agenda.

17. (C) Several questions related to electoral reform remain unanswered. The number of seats in parliament allotted to candidates chosen from the national lists, for example, is unspecified. The proposals envision a gradual increase in this number, but do not provide a baseline for the next parliamentary elections. NOTE: According to Deputy PM Muasher and Zeitoon, Arabiyat from the IAF was surprisingly flexible on this issue. END NOTE. Both the single vote and two-vote proposals recommend redrawing electoral districts so that there is one district per seat in parliament - currently most districts elect two or more MPs to the lower house - but with no guidelines on how these districts should be drawn. Senator Muasher told poloff that in his opinion, the districts should not be drawn on the basis of population alone, but must take into account "geography, population, and level of development." Finally, it is unclear whether the King or the government will make a choice between the single vote and two-vote proposals prior to the public launch of the National Agenda, or whether it will contain both electoral reform recommendations.

A TOUGH SELL

18. (C) While the GOJ has expended considerable effort in developing the National Agenda, this does not appear to have carried over to plans to market the Agenda to the public. Zeitoon promised poloff that there would be a "publicity blitz and roadshow" to include numerous town hall meetings and forums targeting a wide variety of social groups. He was very short on specifics, however, and admitted that garnering strong public approval would be an uphill battle given that many Jordanians are very skeptical that the Agenda will make any real difference in their lives.

19. (C) The battle to win over the public will depend in part on who is actively engaged in promoting the Agenda to Jordanians. PM Badran and Deputy PM Muasher are expected to lead the public relations effort, but their appeal may be limited in view of the government's low public approval ratings, recently made worse by unpopular fuel price hikes. Zeitoon said the GOJ would like prominent members of the commission to address the public on the Agenda's behalf since the combined voices of these members - who represent very different interest groups - could help sway popular opinion. Given the lack of consensus on electoral reform, however, it seems unlikely that all of the commission members would agree to this. Senator Muasher told poloff that while he was "optimistic about parts of the Agenda," he had serious reservations about other parts - though he did not block consensus on them - and could not in good faith stump for the whole package. Arabiyat has already publicly criticized the National Agenda commission, stating in an interview with Arabic weekly Al Sabeel on October 4 that the commission rejected a number of electoral reform proposals because "countervailing forces want to ensure that this country never

enjoys a Chamber of Deputies that really represents the people."

10. (C) Even some of the modernizers on the commission have mixed feelings about the process. Businessman and journalist Mohammad Elayyan told PAO that he was disappointed that his fellow commission members did not embrace a "deeper level" of democratic reform. He added that in his opinion, some recommendations were pushed through without adequate discussion, and that some members "knew where they wanted the commission to go from the start." Elayyan was concerned that Agenda proponents might adopt a "get on board or shut up" attitude, or insinuate that those who didn't buy into the whole National Agenda were somehow undemocratic.

PARLIAMENT GEARS UP FOR A FIGHT

11. (C) Although the National Agenda has yet to be launched publicly, traditionalist forces in parliament are already bracing for a fight. According to sources in the palace and on the commission, both Zeid Rifai, President of the Senate, and Abdul Hadi Majali, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, are rallying opposition against recommendations - particularly on electoral reform - that may threaten entrenched parliamentary interests. In a recent discussion with Charge, Rifai disparaged the National Agenda process. Both Rifai and Majali have also backed publicly - reportedly for purely personal, rather than ideological, reasons - the Jordan Press Association (JPA) in rejecting a leaked Agenda recommendation to repeal the law that requires journalists to be members of the JPA (septel).

COMMENT

12. (C) Internal strife within the National Agenda commission, and the challenges of marketing the Agenda to a skeptical public, should not take away from the GOJ's significant accomplishment in developing a comprehensive and measurable reform strategy. Given the diverse nature of the commission members, sharp debate and differing opinions were to be expected, if not encouraged. The fact that consensus was reached on all but one recommendation in all eight subject areas - including controversial topics such as the tax system and political parties (ref B) - is also noteworthy. Still, the adoption of meaningful electoral reform will remain the litmus test for Jordanian reform efforts in the eyes of many political observers, and it is here that the GOJ faces its greatest challenge. Growing evidence indicates that despite the government's best efforts, MPs will very likely reject legislation to make parliament substantially more representative of the population, leaving the King in a difficult jam as he tries to implement his vision for political reform.

HALE